



# HAPPY F\*\*\*ING HOLIDAYS

A GUIDE FOR GATHERING

# WELCOME

*We're reminded as we swap out our summer duds for sweaters. We're reminded as the leaves change. We know what's coming long before Walgreens changes its decor: The holidays draw nigh.*

Whatever you celebrate, or don't, the onslaught of "Happy Holidays!" and office parties and friends complaining about that obnoxious uncle whose company they're dreading can be an unintended reminder of all that we no longer have, or never had to begin with.

Some of us try to preserve the rituals of our past life, only to find them flat now; others abandon those rituals altogether, only to crave them later on, missing the idiosyncratic traditions that died when that person did. As years pass, we find ourselves missing the rawness of those "first" holidays: what was once a giant black hole that threatened to consume the other seats at the table is now an elephant that lurks in the corner, harder to name, but no less present.

The end result? What a host of ours calls The Trifecta of Sadness: the back-to-back holidays that make her miss her mom all the more.

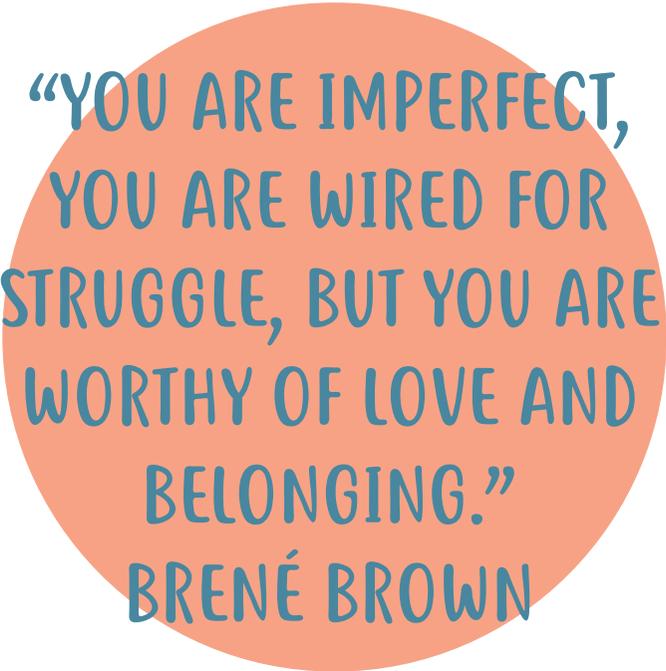
But here's the good news: The holidays don't have to suck.

We cannot separate the bitter from the sweet, and we know enough to know we wouldn't want to. It's not the ache that's the problem. It's all we do to cover-up that ache.

As friends seeking ways to support grieving friends, or as fellow travelers in the land of loss, we can create new holiday traditions that allow us to preserve whatever of the past is worth preserving. We can open our doors to those who could use a door to walk through. We can remember the dead, and celebrate the living. In short: We can take steps to create more sweet.

Let's get cooking





“YOU ARE IMPERFECT,  
YOU ARE WIRED FOR  
STRUGGLE, BUT YOU ARE  
WORTHY OF LOVE AND  
BELONGING.”  
BRENÉ BROWN



# FORWARD

I began hosting Thanksgiving in 2012. In the intervening years, we'd lost all trace of routine. There was the year I went to an ex-boyfriend's family Thanksgiving, and the year my brother and I went out for sushi, and the year we joined my stepdad and stepbrothers and their mom — my stepdad's first wife — and aunt at their family's farmhouse. Even as we carved out our own new normal, the holidays remained that stubborn reminder of all that wasn't there: a black hole that each year threatened to suck us into it.

My brother came down from Oakland with his bestie, Sparkle. There were ten of us in all: friends whose holiday gatherings hadn't survived the presence of an empty seat, queer friends, made orphans not by death but bigotry. It wasn't perfect, but still: We made it through.

For a few years, I continued to approach the holidays with a familiar combination of dread and resignation. I feared the prospect of filling an empty table, and the possibility that it would stay empty. I resented the yearly occasion in which the family I've chosen goes back to the families they didn't have to choose. I'd pretend I couldn't afford the airfare and wanted to avoid the hassle, but the truth, of course, was that I no longer had a home to go back to.

Then, two weeks before Thanksgiving in 2015, my roommate and dear friend, Matt, was in a bike accident. Broken collarbone, punctured lung, a few days in a hospital. One by one, friends opted to stick around: each stated a different reason, most related to work and airfare, but there was something else behind it, too.

As the day approached, we entered the phase we'll call Loving the Shit Out of Each Other, characterized by frequent hugs, nervous laughter, and an uptick in eye contact and knowing looks: that all-too-brief window of time we save for traumatic events, when we're reminded against our will that all of it is tenuous.

By the time the day arrived, the guest list had ballooned to 22. The menu was a free-for-all of family recipes and new discoveries: my mom's cranberry sauce, with wine in place of water, my stepmom's stuffing, roasted beets and roasted cauliflower and roasted brussels sprouts, two 14-lb turkeys and a 5-lb pork loin, a spicy cranberry relish and mashed potatoes and gravy, a goat cheese and sage and squash concoction that's now the stuff of legend.

It was past 8pm when we finally raised our glasses. Matt ate one-handed, his arm still in a sling. I thoroughly embarrassed the Europeans present with a sentimental toast, but I didn't care.

It had taken nine years, but I was finally home. And I was thankful.

- Lennon Flowers, Co-Founder, *The Dinner Party*, Los Angeles



In the following pages, you'll find a series of tips and guiding principles that have emerged from dozens of dinners and loads of trial-and-error. This guide is intended to be neither static nor complete: Feel free to make it your own, and share your wisdom with the rest of us.

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JUST AS NO TWO  
RELATIONSHIPS ARE  
EVER THE SAME,  
NO TWO DINNERS WILL  
EVER BE THE SAME.

Maybe you're here because someone you love has lost someone they love, and you want to be a source of support at a moment in which support is profoundly needed. Maybe you're gathering with family members, and dreading the presence of an empty seat at the table. Maybe this is the year you decide to chuck the turkey and head to Mexico.

What works for one may ring hollow for another, so as always, the most important rule of Dinner Partying is the one for which there is no instruction: You do you.

## A FAVORITE DINNER PARTY RECIPE

Close your eyes. Imagine you're doing the dishes. The supper has ended, the last person just walked out the door. What do you want to feel in this moment? What kind of experience do you hope to have had?

Consider this something akin to that favorite family recipe passed down through the generations, with new flourishes and personal touches added by each new cook. The single most important thing you can do as a host is to know why you're there and what you want folks to leave with. As you design and facilitate the evening, simply aim for that end-point. Don't treat this as a script and don't feel compelled to force it. Treat it as a tool, and a starting point: one you can take or leave as helpful. And remember: additional zest and spice always work well.

### INGREDIENTS

GOOD PEOPLE  
GOOD FOOD (POTLUCK-STYLE)  
OPEN HEARTS

OPTIONAL: MIXTAPE PLAYLIST, CANDLES, FLOWERS, ORNAMENTAL GOURDS, SOUNDTRACK, AND/OR WHATEVER YOU DO TO  
#MAKEITNICE

### DIRECTIONS!

1. **Put a date on the calendar and send out an invite.** Have folks sign up to bring a dish (ideally one with a story behind it).
2. **Cook up the main dish & set the table.** As folks arrive, welcome everyone by pouring drinks. Spend a few minutes in casual conversation as people filter in, and keep them busy with last-minute prep tasks.

#### 3. Plate up.

4. **Raise those glasses high.** Toast those who brought you to the table, and the resilient AF souls gathered round it.

#### 5. Welcome everyone and set the context.

Briefly explain your intention in opening your doors, and the kind of container you wish to create together. You may want to introduce a few guiding principles for the conversation (see Ground Rules, P. 8.), especially if the group doesn't already know each other, or if you're

worried about that problematic uncle (not to scape-goat, but you know the one).

**6. Do introductions.** Have everyone share a bit about what brings them here, and where they are right now. As host, share first.

**7. Pick a conversation-starter.** See P. 10-11.

**8. Let the conversation flow organically, popcorn-style.** People may cry. They should definitely laugh.

**9. Listen intently, connect the dots, and ask follow-up questions.** Have a couple of topics in your back-pocket to stir up conversation, in the event that conversation lags.

**10. Fifteen minutes before the scheduled end (or thereabouts), serve dessert.**

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**12. End the night by asking people how they went for them.** What felt good? What didn't? What was most memorable? What would you want to see more of?

**13. Repeat!**

## MAKE A DISH WITH MEANING



In an age in which many of us live galaxies away from the worlds in which we grew up, food serves as our personal native tongue, our way of introducing ourselves and the people and places whose imprints we carry with us.

We encourage you to prepare a dish with a story behind it: a family recipe or holiday staple, a popular food tradition from where you grew up, a dish that ties you to both the living and the dead. Same goes for all guests: It's a great way to get a glimpse into someone else's world, and it immediately invites a story.

## GROUND RULES

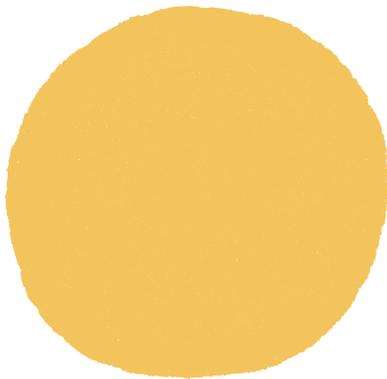
Some groups call them “group agreements”, others “touchstones”, others “house rules”. Some are named, some are simply modeled and normed. They’re not meant to box you in, but to create a container that invites real courage and real vulnerability and real #realtalk.

### 1. Stick with “I” statements, and remember: No two stories are ever the same.

This is basically The Golden Rule of Dinner Partying. Your experience is yours and please honor and respect that others’ experiences are theirs. Putting this to practice is hard work: It means, in the words of our friends at The Center for Courage & Renewal, “no fixing, saving, advising or correcting each other.” Your job is to silence the noise and tune into your inner voice, trusting that everyone else at the table has the power to do the same. Simply speak your truth.

**2. Being here is participating.** You are, at no point, under pressure to talk. We welcome silence just as much as we welcome speech, and ask only that when you speak, you do so intentionally. Here there’s no such thing as an awkward silence.

### 3. Keep it confidential.



## EXERCISE: SET COMMUNITY STANDARDS



**Instructions:** Draw a large circle. Inside the circle, write down all of standards you want to set for the night. For ex: warmth, vulnerability, respect, curiosity. Outside the circle, write down everything you want to leave at the (metaphorical) door. For ex: distraction (phones!), tomorrow’s to-do list, unsolicited advice, politics, assumptions.

*Note: You can do this on your own ahead of time, as a way to set your own intentions for the evening, or you can even do it ahead of time over email.*



## THREE TIPS FOR SELF-PRESERVATION, BY KATHLEEN CALLAGHY

**Don't do anything you don't want to do.** It sounds simple, but so much of what we do during the holidays — visiting certain family members, giving gifts, traditions — are so habitual that it seems like sacrilege to say ‘you know what, this actually doesn't help me, so I'm not going to do it anymore.’ This could be harder or easier depending on how understanding the family is. But I'll say this — making the decision not to travel across the country to visit my family during Xmas was one of the most empowering decisions I ever made. I actually had a restful holiday.

**Have an escape route.** Make sure you have somewhere — a room, a coffee shop, a friend's house, where you can go and be completely as you are when you need to. Having my own space in my brother's house was essential when there was company downstairs and I just couldn't handle socializing.

**Have a safety net in place.** This also seems like a no-brainer, but what I mean by that is thinking in advance and not putting yourself in a situation where you have no access to things that nurture you — e.g. friends, routines, favorite spots, animals, whatever it is.

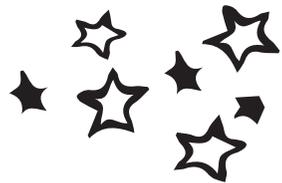
## CONVERSATION STARTERS

The holidays are those rarest of days when our appetite for earnestness exceeds our appetite for snark. What might be deemed cheesy the day before is suddenly fair-game. Don't fear the feels.

Take a look at the questions below, and pick and choose the ones that speak to you. You may try putting all of the questions in a bowl in the center of the table, and inviting guests to pick them one at a time, eventually working your way to the bottom of the bowl. Or you can place one question next to every plate, and invite whoever wants to to open up their question of the group. You may find that conversations unfold organically after just one question: **Let it.**

*How do you practice compassion for yourself when you are overwhelmed?*

WHAT IS "HOME" TO YOU?



*Where or from whom did you learn to stand up for the things you believe in?*

DESCRIBE A MOMENT OF KINDNESS THAT REALLY MEANT SOMETHING TO YOU.

*Which memory do you wish you could relive?*

WHAT'S THE BEST  
LESSON YOU'VE  
EVER BEEN TAUGHT,  
AND BY WHOM?

---



*How are you different now than you were before?*



WHEN DO YOU  
FEEL MOST  
FREE IN YOUR  
LIFE? WHEN  
DO YOU FEEL  
RESTRICTED?

---

HOW DO YOU RECHARGE  
DURING THE HOLIDAYS?



*How are you different now than you were before?*



*Who in your life have you forgiven?  
Whose forgiveness do you long to ask for?*

## GRAB THAT JOURNAL

Craving some alone time, and need a minute to escape the holiday hubbub? Grab a journal and find a quiet nook.



### WRITE FIRST, TALK SECOND



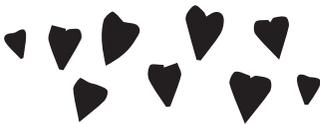
Letter-writing allows us to give voice to things we wouldn't say otherwise. It serves as a powerful source of connection between friends, loved ones living and dead, or even strangers.

And sometimes the alchemy of letters inspires us to write what we ourselves most need to hear.

### EXERCISE



Write three tiny letters to yourself, sharing lessons and words you've held onto, or lessons or words you wish they'd shared, or words you'd like to pass forward. You can do this solo, or invite friends and family to participate, and if (and only if) they so desire, to share reflections and snippets with one another afterward.



What did you do that helped you get through it?

## REFLECTION TIME



Take a few moments to think about what loss has taught you about your strengths and what's most important to you. Write about the experience, addressing any or all of the questions marked yellow.

Now think about a current situation you are struggling through, and free-write on the prompts in red.

What personal resources did you draw on, and what strengths did you use? Did you seek out information, advice, or any other kind of support?

What did this experience teach you about how to deal with adversity?

How did this experience make you stronger?

Which of these strengths and resources can you draw on in this situation?

Are there any coping skills or strengths you want to develop? If so, how could you begin to do so using this situation as an opportunity to grow?

## TOASTS & BLESSINGS

Toasts are a great way to kick off a conversation. Once everyone has plated up, invite everyone to raise their glass (water, wine, whatever it may be):

**Raise your glass to the person you wish could be here tonight.** (Tip: Have each person say that name out loud if they so desire. Yes, this can resemble a drinking game. But it can be powerful to say and hear a name that rarely gets mentioned. And hey, it's the holidays.)

**Raise your glass to those that came before us and to those around the table tonight.**

May this dinner provide us the nourishment we seek.

**To radical hospitality. To unity in diversity. To revolutionary love. We raise our glasses!**

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**Invite everyone to light a tealight candle and share the name of a person who inspires courage in you, living or dead, famous or familial, and why.** Toast those just named, and those who inspire us to be our best selves, and ourselves and each other for everything it took to make it to this moment.

## HANDWASHING RITUAL



Pass a bowl of water and a hand-towel around the table, having each person wash their hands and hold the bowl for the next person.

As you wash your hands, breathe in the quiet and allow it to soothe you, and breathe out whatever you're ready to let go.

*We offer a blessing of gratitude for all the hands that helped to prepare this meal.*

*We offer a blessing of gratitude for the hands that helped to raise us and shape us.*

*We offer a blessing the work of our hands in all that we do. And we open our hands as an expression of gratitude as we prepare to eat, to meet, and to know each other.*



At the end of a dinner, take a moment of silence around the table and breathe. This particular meditation is based on a type of compassionate meditation known as Tonglen, as described by Pema Chödrön: “So in the in-breath you breathe in with the wish to take away the suffering, and breathe out with the wish to send comfort and happiness to the same people, animals, nations, or whatever it is you decide.”

**Breathe in** with the knowledge that you are strong enough to help carry the discomfort and suffering you long to be rid of. Breathe in fear for someone whose future feels uncertain, breathe in disappointment for someone who feels they have lost, breathe in loneliness for someone who isolates, or breathe in frustration for someone who feels misunderstood.

Then, **breathe out** with the desire to relieve those suffering, to give those who need it extra strength, to send out love, compassion and understanding. Breathe out health, love, family, support and forgiveness. Breathe out all of the things we try to hold onto or try to achieve for ourselves. Give them away. Imagine breathing out beautiful, heart-shaped breaths. In the midst of our sadness, where we are tempted to isolate, feel alone and misunderstood, we can give love to others simply through the breath. Sometimes, it may be all we have to give.

BREATHE IN.  
BREATHE OUT.

## ADDITIONAL IDEAS: ACTIVITIES WE LOVE

A 2014 study by researchers at Harvard Business School found that people who'd found a way to move forward, who were no longer mired in despair and what we typically associate as grief, were not the ones who'd attempted to entirely move on.<sup>1</sup> They were the people who'd discovered and embraced what the researchers called, "personal rituals."

### CREATE NEW TRADITIONS:

"THE DAY AFTER THANKSGIVING WE WENT TO A CAFE THAT NONE OF US HAD EVER BEEN TO BEFORE. OUR COUSINS GOT T SHIRTS MADE FOR EVERYONE WITH OUR MANTRA 'I KEEP DANCING' AND WE ALL ATE GOOD FOOD, PLAYED GAMES, AND REMEMBERED JULIA TOGETHER. AFTER THAT WE WENT BOWLING AND EVEN DID SOME DANCING!"



Most were done in private, and for the most part, they had nothing to do with religion. Most existed outside the bounds of anniversaries and birthdays, of Mother's Days and Father's Days. And most were extremely personal, related somehow to the person they'd lost or their relationship.

TL:DR? The more we try to bury something, or shove it under the rug, or move on, the more space it takes up in our lives. Moving forward actually means embracing a new normal, without letting go the people and experiences that had shaped who we are.

CREATING NEW TRADITIONS HELPED US GRAB ONTO SOMETHING NEW AND OFFERED HOPE THAT LIFE DOES GO ON AND WE CAN KEEP DANCING THROUGH THE PAIN. IT'S HELPFUL FOR ME TO THINK OF LIFE NOW AS A SET OF NEW EXPERIENCES RATHER THAN CONSTANTLY LAMENTING ABOUT WHAT I'VE LOST. JULIA IS WITH US IN ALL OF THESE NEW TRADITIONS AND I'D LIKE TO THINK THAT SHE IS PROUD OF HOW WE ARE TRYING TO EMBRACE LIFE."

— SARAH, IRVINE

## BRING A READING



Invite guests to bring a reading (poem, quote, song lyric) that's fortified them over the last few months. Read it together, popcorn-style, and allow the words to wash over you. Share whatever is stirred.

## CREATE A MEMORIAL LANTERN:



In 2016, Bay Area Dinner Partiers erected an altar at a Dia de los Muertos festival in San Francisco's Mission district. With help from host Mandy Hixon Hanna, they created hand-made lanterns, using a piece of tracing paper to create copies of favorite photos. Each traced image became the body of the lantern, and tape and additional pieces of paper were enough to create the top and base. Check out this video from Mandy, with instructions on how to create your own:

<https://youtu.be/Q42vnRLR2KE>

REVISIT WHAT THEY LOVED:  
“I SET ASIDE TIME IN THE MORNING OF A HOLIDAY TO DO SOMETHING THAT HONORS MY BROTHER, LIKE READ A LETTER FROM HIM, DANCE TO A SONG WE BOTH LOVED — SOMETHING LITTLE LIKE THAT. ONE YEAR I COULDN'T SHAKE THE FEELING THAT I HAD TO BUY HIM A PRESENT STILL, SO I BOUGHT SOMETHING HE WOULD'VE LOVED THAT I COULD USE TOO. IT HELPED ME STOP FEELING LIKE I WAS FORGETTING SOMETHING.”

— GENEVIEVE, DETROIT

## CREATE AN ALTAR



Have everyone bring a photo or an object that's meaningful to them: the kind that activates your senses, something that immediately conjures a place or a person, the touch of a hand, the sound of a voice, a moment in which you felt fully alive. Add to it flowers, photographs, candles, sweets, fabric, mementos, found treasures, or favorite foods, and invite everyone to share the story.

INVITE YOUR FRIENDS: “I WANTED A WAY TO PROVIDE A SAFE SPACE TO CELEBRATE OUR MOTHERS, TO SAMPLE THE FLAVORS OF OUR RESPECTIVE AND DIVERSE CHILDHOODS, AND TO SHARE THE WISDOM THAT WE LEARNED FROM THOSE WHO GAVE US LIFE. SO EACH YEAR FOR MOTHER’S DAY, I INVITE FRIENDS AND FRIENDS OVER FOR WHAT I CALL, ‘REMEMBERING OUR MOTHERS (DAY) BRUNCH.’ I SET THE TABLE WITH FLOWERS, ORANGE JUICE AND CHAMPAGNE, AND THE FRENCH TOAST AND CHOCOLATE CHIP PANCAKES THAT MY BROTHERS AND I MADE OUR OWN MOTHER FOR YEARS, UNTIL SHE TOLD US SHE DIDN’T LIKE CHOCOLATE CHIP PANCAKES.

I ONLY KNOW ABOUT HALF OF THE PEOPLE WHO WALK THROUGH MY DOOR BEARING BREAKFAST TREATS OF THEIR OWN. FOR SOME, THE LOSS IS DECADES OLD; FOR OTHERS, ONLY A FEW MONTHS. THEIR ATTENDANCE IS AN ACT OF COURAGE FOR THEM AND AN ACT OF TRUST IN ME. ON ONE WALL, WE POST OUR MOMS’ FAVORITE SAYINGS: ‘CRUMBS HAVE NO CALORIES,’ ‘NEVER GO OUT WITHOUT LIPSTICK,’ ‘A WOMAN NEEDS A MAN LIKE A FISH NEEDS A BICYCLE,’ ‘MAKE YOUR OWN MUSIC.’

AFTERWARD, I’LL DECOMPRESS IN FRONT OF THE TV, OR GO TO A MOVIE WITH A CLOSE FRIEND. THE GATHERINGS FULFILL THEIR PURPOSE MARVELOUSLY, BUT THE TRANSITION BACK TO A SPACE WHERE NOT EVERYONE IS GRIEVING CAN BE A CHALLENGE, EVEN FOR A SEASONED HOST. PLAN ACCORDINGLY.”

— ESTHER, LOS ANGELES

## CREATE PLACE CARDS WHERE PEOPLE CAN FILL IN THE BLANK:



“Ask me about...” (Host can prompt people to fill in with loved one’s name, or it can be free-for-all: “Ask me about anything, this is just what I want to talk about tonight.”)

These can be used as conversation-starters, or host can start off the dinner by asking people to share about what they wrote.



Dinner isn't just the thing you do with family. It's what creates it.

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